

Throw your napkin on the floor: Authenticity, culinary tourism, and a pedagogy of the senses

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This article explores the educational objectives of a University of Calgary short-term travel study program (Food Culture in Spain 2011). A combination of secondary research and primary data collected through in-depth interviews with former program participants, as well as student reflective essays written in the field, shows that the sensory experience with food is an important pedagogical tool. Focusing on questions of intentionality, sensory learning, and the meaning of authenticity, we explore the complications inherent in a formal education program built around culinary tourism. We argue that by the end of the three-week program in Spain, students identify as informed culinary tourists who recognize the complexity of authenticity and understand how sensory experiences can inspire and motivate both a bodily and an intellectual understanding of food and their relationship with it.

Introduction

May 13, 2011. It is Day 5, and our group is in Cordoba, two hours south of Madrid, to visit an old *almazara*, an olive oil press in the countryside, and to experience the Arabic and Moorish influences on the food culture of this region. We are staying in a small hotel in the middle of the old town, across the street from the tourist attraction that makes Cordoba famous, the Mezquita. It's an early rise this morning and even at this hour we find ourselves weaving in and out of crowds of tourists. We pass souvenir shops filled with t-shirts and cold drinks. Some students stop to peruse the wares and plan for a return visit later that day, only to have us shepherd them back into line, as the bus is waiting and we cannot be late. We make our way across the bridge connecting the old town to the newer section. The streets in the old town are too narrow for our tour bus to manoeuvre, but this popular tourist town has accounted for that, establishing a tour bus parking area across the bridge where the many groups of tourists can meet their guides. As we board our bus to the Nuñez de Prado olive oil press, we pass at least five other buses, filled to capacity with tour groups of various nationalities and ages. Within five minutes we pass an industrial park, clear the city and are driving through the rolling hills and orchards of Andalucia. Very few cars come this way and the roads are narrow; at points it feels as if the bus won't be able to make the curve. Our group is chatting, watching the scenery from their windows, and making plans for the day ahead. And then the smell hits. At first most students aren't sure what they are smelling -- intense, fruity, only vaguely familiar. But then it dawns on them. It's olive oil. More specifically, it's the smell of olives growing on trees; something that most of them, born and bred in Canada, have never smelled in the raw state. They are shocked. And curious. Some ask, "Are olives a fruit or a vegetable?" A fruit. They grow on trees. "So olive oil is a fruit oil?" Sort of. "Do people drink it?" Yes. Wait until we get to the olive oil press. We'll see. And smell. And taste.

These students were the third group to visit the Nuñez de Prado *almazara* with us. Since 2007, we have been co-teaching the University of Calgary's "Food Culture in Spain" group study program.

This three-week travel study program, offered every second year, engages undergraduate students in inquiry-based research, writing, and group presentations on globalisation, culinary tourism, and the popular practices of food production and consumption in Spain. With a group of 27 students and a program assistant, we, the two instructors, travel from western Canada to Spain, where we spend three weeks exploring the country considered by some to be the modern culinary capital of Europe.

The program is intellectually intense, and encourages students to think and feel differently about food; as sustenance, as expression of culture and regional identity, and as a mode of communication. Foremost in our minds, as teachers, is the complexity that lies at the heart of culinary tourism, which has emerged as an enticing and profitable leisure activity throughout the world. Culinary tourism offers the promise of an authentic engagement with another culture; at the same time, as many culinary tourists have seen, it seems to encourage host countries to “package” their food and culture into desirable and palatable “experiences” for tourists. Spain has been extraordinarily successful on this front, establishing itself within popular media as a serious destination for “foodies.” It is the site of many well-known experiments in eating: from artisan production, to molecular gastronomy, to Michelin-starred restaurants in off-the-beaten-track locations. It also has entire neighbourhoods – even towns and villages – whose principle *raison d’être* seems to be an aggressively marketed tourist experience. By organising a group study program around the various (and sometime competing) practices of food and eating in Spain, we endeavour to explore the diversity of Spain’s food culture, always questioning, but just as often, embracing, the pleasures and challenges of our experience.

Our program, while quite clearly representative of a constructed, formal learning experience, also makes space for and encourages informal and incidental learning, particularly as inspired by sensory

experience. It is not our goal to romanticise informal or sensory learning; rather, we wish to acknowledge that many students feel discouraged, after years of formal education, from paying attention to their sensory experiences. This romanticisation is difficult to avoid; as Swan (2012: 59) suggests, “Experience, particularly in its emotional and bodily representations is sometimes is sometimes presumed to be un-mediated and un-ideological as emotions and bodies are often thought to be more real, more natural and more true than rationality or cognition.” Through assignments, lectures, and discussions, we encourage students to value sensory learning without disproportionately privileging it over cognitive learning; after all, food and eating are integrally connected to the senses. We hope that that on its best days, our program makes a space for students to incorporate sensory learning into their more formal academic work without creating a binary between ‘the lived’ and ‘the studied’ or the sensory and the cognitive.

In this paper we utilise a combination of secondary research and primary data collected through written assignments and in-depth, post-program interviews with participants from the 2011 “Food Culture in Spain” program. Through analysis of this data, we aim to highlight how a sensory experience with food can be an important pedagogical strategy that often connects formal and informal learning. Specifically, we wish to explore the following questions: How can the ‘intentionality’ of culinary tourism be mobilised to foster empowered, critical, reflective learning? In what ways does the desire for an “authentic” food experience motivate learning? Finally, to what extent can sensory experience contribute to a student’s understanding of authenticity?

Culinary tourism and authenticity: Defining the terms and reviewing the literature

The first step in understanding the pedagogical significance of a short-term travel study program dedicated to the study of food is a definition of culinary tourism; after all, the role of the tourist is the most prominent role many of the students play while in the field. Culinary tourism and the experience of understanding another culture through food constitute a significant field of inquiry in food studies. Culinary tourism is different from other forms of travelling in that there is a pre-determined motivation for seeking out food experiences. Lucy Long (2004: 21) defines culinary tourism as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an other” and she emphasises the “individual as an active agent in constructing meanings within a tourist experience.” For Long, culinary tourism cannot be accidental. Intentionality is crucial. In an educational tourism context, it is the intentionality or ‘eating with a pedagogical purpose’ that can push the tourist from eating as a form of sustenance to eating with a critical eye.

It is important to acknowledge here that the culinary tourist experience cultivated as part of a university degree program of study is distinct from the culinary tourist experience designed for leisure tourists. While there is much overlap between the two groups, we have seen, firsthand, the differences between touring with the primary motivation of pleasure, combined, perhaps, with informal learning, and touring with the joint motivation of pleasure and formal learning in an academic discipline. The motivation for our development of this group study program was a culinary tour we took in 2004 with a group of chefs and culinary students. On that tour, as culinary tourists, we were driven by a desire to see what others don’t see, do what others don’t do, and eat what others don’t eat – classic “food adventuring,” in Lisa Heldke’s terms (2007). We were aware of the ‘risks’ of culinary tourism – of slipping into patterns of colonialism

and cultural appropriation that can often accompany a desire, to borrow the words of bell hooks (2000), to “eat the other”.

Three years later, when leading our own program in our dual role as guides and teachers, we were driven by similar desires, **but those desires were coupled with a deliberate and intentional pedagogical goal.** We wanted our students to engage in Long’s “intentional exploration” of food and culture, and we coupled that with a requirement for equally intentional scholarly reflection on their experiences. In addition to more traditional assignments such as research papers and seminar presentations, we crafted reflection questions and a reflective final exam based on both the formal components of our program and the informal experiences **that students had on their own and in groups.** The questions asked students to frame their food and travel experiences in light of their own backgrounds, their upbringing, and the socio-cultural values that have shaped their learning. We hoped that through this intentional exploration, our students could reflect on the hegemonic traditions of culinary tourism while simultaneously embracing the opportunities provided by culinary tourism – to experience, to share, and to interact in thoughtful and meaningful ways.

Jenny Molz (2007: 78) furthers Long’s definition of culinary tourism, explaining that, “food acts as a transportable symbol of place and of cultural identity,” or a tangible reminder, for the tourist, of a geographic location and experience of culture. Both Long and Molz emphasise that it is not so much the food itself that is an object of cultural experience but rather it is the subject’s experience with the food that takes it to a higher level of significant meaning. Food itself does not change depending upon context; a Valencia orange is a Valencia orange, whether it is pulled off a supermarket produce display in Canada or picked directly from a tree in Spain.

For Long and Molz, the meaning or “symbol” of place, culture, and identity lies in the person experiencing the food, who is quite

likely to have a different experience eating the same orange in two very different contexts. Long's "active agent," then, is the key to understanding the effect of culinary tourism, specifically on students who are eating and drinking, not solely for pleasure, but within the formal curriculum requirements of an academic program. Both Long and Molz are relying upon John Urry's notion of the tourist gaze as fundamental to the way culinary tourists intentionally seek out food experiences. Urry (Urry and Larsson, 2011:1-2) suggests, as he did for the first time in 1990, that "the concept of the gaze highlights that looking is a learned ability and the pure and innocent eye is a myth." That "learned ability" is "conditioned by personal experiences and memories framed by rules and styles." Like Long and Molz, Urry sees the subject, or in our case, the student, as the meaning maker, particularly when it comes to making sense of the ways in which their travel experience is framed by their socially constructed understandings of race, class, gender, and other components of identity and community. Our students, as largely white, largely middle-class Canadians, easily fall into the trap of painting the Other with broad strokes; they speak, in advance of our travels, of 'Spanish food,' 'Spanish people,' and 'Spanish culture' as though the differences between Canada and Spain will be far more profound than any differences within Spain -- and as though they, as Canadians, will have a unified cultural experience. We try to complicate these presumptions by asking students to identify and be cognisant of the ways in which their own backgrounds influence their interaction with the Other, as well as the ways in which they see evidence of Othering in the country they are visiting.

The further students get into analysing and unpacking their relationship to food and their role as a tourist, the more determined they become to avoid what they see as the trappings of heavily constructed tourist experiences. They become fixed on the pursuit of what they define as an authentic food experience. Authenticity is a complicated term – not just for undergraduate students studying

food in Spain, but also for those theorists who attempt to define the term for tourism studies. John Taylor (2001: 8) suggests that for a long time, authenticity posed as “objectivism” and that “It [held] the special powers both of distance and of ‘truth’.” This characterisation of authenticity suggests that the tourist might observe a cultural event and then be filled with some knowledge about a particular culture. With this definition there is very little active engagement between tourist and event, a problem perhaps best described by MacCannell (1973), who suggests that tourists’ quests for authentic experiences are frustrating, if not futile. MacCannell utilises Erving Goffman’s model of “front stage” and “back stage,” where the front of house is the staged tourist ‘show’ and the back of house is the more ‘real’ local space. However, MacCannell is doubtful that tourists can find authenticity in either, as the back spaces are often just as staged as the front spaces – something that culinary tourists certainly find as they discover that their special ‘all-access’ visits to award-winning restaurant kitchens are just as heavily constructed as their experience as guests in the dining room. For MacCannell, there is an illusion of authenticity that will inevitably frustrate tourists if they continue to define a successful tourist experience as one in which they get ‘behind the scenes.’

Ning Wang (1999: 364) is perhaps more optimistic than MacCannell, in his analysis of what constitutes an authentic tourist experience, suggesting that “tourists are not merely searching for authenticity of the Other. They also search for the authenticity of, and between, themselves.” Wang (1999: 359) calls for tourists to have a conscious sense of self that makes the tourists aware of their own subjectivity **within the world:**

Thus, existential authenticity, unlike [an] object-related version, can often have nothing to do with the issue of whether toured objects are real. In search of [a] tourist experience which is existentially authentic, tourists are preoccupied with an existential state of Being activated by certain tourist activities.

For Wang, existential authenticity, or the authenticity of “being,” relies on a balance between reason and emotion, and depends on activation by experience -- this is precisely where the daily reflective writing assignments become useful. We are encouraging students to physically and emotionally immerse themselves in experiences, but also to step back and make sense of those experiences by thinking about their own place within them; to reflect upon the ways in which their personal and cultural histories, their values, their beliefs, and their expectations influence their interpretation of any given activity. Our reflective prompts move the focus away from identifying authenticity in the object and toward identifying authenticity in the student’s interaction with the object. Wang’s notion of existential authenticity is rooted in the conscious relationship between object and subject, making space for students to be part of the construction of an authentic experience, rather than luckily stumbling upon one in a hole-in-the-wall restaurant outside of the touristy areas of a small Spanish town. When students interrogate the relationship between their expectations and their experiences, they begin to understand that their intentional subjective engagement is a better marker of authenticity than any of the objective qualities of the activity in which they participate.

Positioning students as agents in the making of an existentially authentic experience leads directly into our primary goal in our Food Culture travel study program – the entwining of formal, informal, cognitive, and sensory learning. Here, the work of Allison Hayes-Conroy and Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2008) on the role of visceral experience in learning is particularly useful. As the Hayes-Conroys (2008: 465) point out, “...memory, perception, cognitive thinking, historical experience, and other material relations and immaterial forces all intersect with individuals’ sensory grasp of the world.” For students who have often seen their learning experiences in binary terms (formal/informal, individual/group, mind/body), the intentional enmeshing of these concepts, through our teaching and

through their reflective essays, is an important step in achieving the learning goals set out in this program.

The intentionality of culinary tourism

As program coordinators, curriculum designers, and teachers, we were explicit in our desire and intent to position students as the meaning makers, and to have them approach their travel with intentionality – to be deliberate in acknowledging and challenging their frames of reference, their assumptions, and their observations. In our trip to the olive oil press, students began to see themselves as active constructors of their own experience, rather than people who simply step into pre-existing situations. Instead of walking into a ready-made tourist scenario where information was fed to them unprompted, they were responsible for directing discussion, asking questions, and thinking ahead to the ways in which they might write about the experience. In both reflective writing and interviews, many of the students referred specifically to their intentional adoption of the student-tourist role, suggesting that they wanted to experience events with a depth of awareness that they associated as being distinct from what they understand to be the typical tourist gaze. Students spoke of seeing the student-tourist role as less passive or superficial than the typical tourist role, at least for themselves. Most of them acknowledged that this travel experience was distinctly different than past situations in which they had considered themselves to be leisure tourists. Lauren, a third year Music student, describes her efforts in a post program interview:

[We were] not just accepting things exactly as you see them, but looking deeper into it. And I am specifically thinking of the olive oil press where we didn't just say "OK, that's how he does it." There were so many questions that people asked... "Oh, why do you do this?" and "How long have you done that for?" and you are just interested in so many other aspects of it and always trying to search for something deeper.

That deliberateness in gaining as much depth of knowledge as possible about the processes and practices of this family-run olive oil press – much like MacCannell’s notion of getting “backstage” – was indicative of the attitude of most of the students. We urged students to take advantage of their location, their surroundings, and the opportunity to ask questions of everyone they met. Several of the students talked, months after the program had ended, about how powerfully their own questions and reflections of the field trip played in their memory of the experience.

For Alyssa, a third year Communication Studies student, this experience is a turning point as the students’ inquiry-based learning became the subject of their social discussions:

The field trip that I always remember is going to the olive oil press...we were looking out the window and everyone was like, ‘Where are we? This is totally different than anything we have seen before’ so it already started off as a new experience and we were all ready to engage with something different than we had before... on the bus ride back we were all talking about that experience the whole time. We didn’t start talking about our lives or all that kind of stuff. We really wanted to continue talking about the olive oil press and the different things we learned there and how we were so excited for everyone to try this olive oil.

As teachers, we were entirely aware, on that same bus ride, that this was the first time that we’d heard the students talking about their learning at a time when they weren’t ‘required’ to. It was a moment at which the students’ own determination to engage, head-on, with the course content, became obvious. Lauren, in her post-program interview, mentions the field trip to a family-run winery in the Rioja region as another instance in which she wanted to be ‘more than’ a tourist. In her mind –consciously reflecting on experiences was somehow different than simply racking up experiences for the sake of saying she had done or seen something. She described the realisation that even as she was participating in an activity that she primarily

associates with leisure, she kept thinking “Oh, what would I write about this” or “how would I think about this if I was going to write a reflective paper?” This deliberate reflection became commonplace as the program went on. When students wrote about taste and smell, they began to use more complex language. Instead of describing the taste of a meal as “good” or “bad” or “different,” they began to make connections to memory, place, and time. Their reflections demonstrated an intersection of the sensory and the cognitive with increasing complexity throughout the program.

Just as frequently throughout the program, students demonstrated intentionality in the way they spoke of their plans for back home, thinking aloud of ways they might approach their daily life with the intentionality of a culinary tourist. One of the most popular topics of conversation in travel study programs is the comparison to daily life in Canada. But rather than simply noting difference or engaging in simplistic better/worse comparisons, students expressed an explicit desire to take components of their daily lived experience in Spain and find a way to insert these components into their lives at home. In a reflective essay, Lauren speaks of the trip to the olive oil press giving her “a personal connection with the olive oil” and making her “consciously aware of all other products as well.” Dena, a third year Communications Studies student, sees her experiences in Spain providing her with “a more fully rounded perspective on how I might attempt to re-create the fullest pleasure of eating when I return home.” Perhaps most insightfully, Amy, a fourth year Communications Studies student, writes of her newfound awareness of the relationship she can have with food:

I have learned that I can't be passive [about food]. If I want good food or healthy food, then I have to take the steps to earn the knowledge. Then I can make informed decisions about what I'm eating, where it's coming from, and is it good for me. Once I have the knowledge, then I have the power, and every time I use it, it is to my advantage. Not only do I have a more “accurate

consciousness” (Berry, 1992, p. 234), but I will get more pleasure from eating because I know that I am taking the steps to be an informed eater.

Perhaps contrary to their previous travel experiences in which they cordoned off travel time as pleasure-oriented ‘special occasion’ time, these students were treating their travels as the inspiration for new ways to eat, shop, cook, and engage with their daily lives at home in ways that they hadn’t done in their previous travel experiences.

Quest for authenticity: The impossible dream

For the student-tourist – much as for many culinary tourists – there is a pervasive desire to distinguish their travel experience from that of others by seeking out ‘authentic’ local food. Authenticity, along with being a major theme in our academic inquiry, has become something of a running joke in our travel study program. Months prior to leaving for Spain, students start talking about experiencing ‘the authentic food culture of Spain,’ and they are convinced that they will avoid the tourist ‘traps’ and find that little ‘hole in the wall’ cafe where the ‘real’ Spanish food is served. They all have different ideas about what is real Spanish food -- *paella*, *rabo de toro*, *tapas* -- but finding it is their mission. By midway through the program, their ideas around authenticity have shifted completely. Restaurants outside tourist areas are not instantly, inherently more “authentic” than those in major tourist centres, and some of the best food they eat isn’t Spanish at all. They are convinced there is no such thing as authenticity, and like MacCannell suggests, they discover that a search for the authentic food culture of any society is a search fraught with tension and frustration.

Inevitably, by the second week of our three-week program, we have to stage an intervention with our students who have become frustrated and discouraged in their search for authenticity. We ask students to consider Wang’s idea of the existential tourist who can participate

in cultivating an authentic experience. We provide prompts that ask students to examine how their responses to an experience might be, as Wang suggests, both rational and emotional, and how delicate that balance can be. We ask them to step back from their experiences, and to critically analyse the socio-cultural influences that inform and shape their initial reactions. From a pedagogical perspective, this is an immeasurably valuable approach to discussing, positioning, and **understanding authenticity as it relates to food pedagogy**. Students who are actively engaged in finding an authentic food experience while simultaneously being aware of the futility of such a search are students who are critically evaluating their relationship to food by engaging, daily, with food and eating as objects of inquiry rather than simply as products or activities necessary to daily life.

Within days of arriving in Spain, students realise how difficult it is to find anything resembling their pre-conceived notions of ‘authentic’ Spanish food. Their first trip to Madrid’s Plaza Mayor bombards them with placards advertising a popular processed ‘OK Paella’ being served in most of the plaza’s restaurants. In the streets surrounding our hotel in Cordoba, restaurants and cafes all post a ‘tourist menu’ next to their *menu del dia*, usually consisting of a highly Americanised version of a Spanish main dish, accompanied by French fries and a pre-made dessert. Students feel cheated by this food, and by the assumption that tourists will want a different meal than that which offered to Spaniards. As a consequence, students become increasingly frustrated in their efforts to avoid the tourist label. In a post-program interview, Amy explains the frustration of the early days in the program:

The word [authentic] came up so much and it was such a struggle for everybody to wrap their head around and all of the different words that went with it, and we were constantly looking into restaurants.... ‘well that place can’t be authentic, look how many tourists are there, we cannot go there.’ And then we would go to the next place, ‘well this place has nobody in it, it must be

authentic' ...I tried so hard when we were there not to be the typical tourist...

Another fourth year Communications Studies student, Lacey, says that authenticity became “an enemy of a word,” suggesting that at times, the obsession that she and her friends had with finding authentic meals and experiences “overshadowed our ability to experience pleasure.” Erica, a third year Communications Studies student, articulated the frustration best in a reflective essay, saying that “Authenticity is an intangible concept of idealism that we grasp at. It is almost like the more we try to make our experience something authentic, the more it becomes contaminated by well intended, but counteractive efforts.”

Our goal was to have students complicate their earliest uses of the word “authentic” and to question what it means to engage, authentically, with a meal, or an experience, or, indeed, with a culture. The purpose of the exercise was not to destroy all pleasure or joy for the students -- on the contrary, it was to help them understand that authenticity was not an objective concept -- that it didn't live in a particular food, or a particular restaurant, but rather, in their emotional, sensory, and thoughtful engagement with an experience. We ask them to try and explain how eating paella in the middle of Plaza Mayor surrounded by other tourists might still be an authentic experience; how authenticity might, as Wang suggests, be located “of and between themselves” rather than in the paella or the plaza. And, so, in the second week of the program, we start talking in more depth about the role that they play in having an authentic experience.

For many students, the olive oil press proved to be an experience that they could eventually embrace as existentially authentic. In this field trip, the students were, for three hours, immersed in the world of a multi-generation family run business, organic long before organic was a buzzword, where catering to tourists was a very low priority. Having come directly from Cordoba, where we were surrounded by

souvenir shops and tourist menus and endless accommodations for throngs of tourists, we now found ourselves in an environment with no promotional materials, no tourist information centre and not even a shop in which to properly display and sell their olive oil. For many of the students, the sudden departure from having everything handed to them made them more interested and engaged in the experience. Amy gave a great deal of thought to the subject, and came up with the following final exam reflection:

Food can be an incredible insight, but one can't simply eat Spanish food and believe that they better understand the Spanish way of life. For me, our visit to the olive oil press was an authentic experience, and I learned from this trip that this type of authentic experience is particularly important. Actually learning about the history of olive oil, seeing with my own eyes the machine used to make it and hearing the passion and pride in [the owner's] voice has changed the way I look at olive oil forever. I will never be able to go to Safeway and buy the cheapest brand without thinking about how it was made, where it is from, etc. I would never have got such an experience if I had just used olive oil in a restaurant. I know that when I make the decision to research where the olive oil I'm buying is from, when I choose to spend the extra money on a quality product, that I will get more pleasure from what I'm eating because I'll be thinking about how I am supporting a traditional family business like Paco's. That is what I believe an authentic experience is, and why I know it is important.

In the same way that the absence of tourists doesn't inherently render a place or event authentic, the presence of tourists, such as in our visit to the olive oil press, doesn't immediately render an experience inauthentic. When students had the opportunity to touch the olives, see the press, taste the oil, and talk to its producer, they connected with this food experience both cognitively and viscerally, and began to understand the value of learning through both their minds and their senses. This experience is not unmediated; it does not exist, independent of those who visit, as some sort of quintessential, pure, authentic marker of Spanish life and culture. But for many

of our students, this was one of the first moments in which they saw and articulated relationships between their past beliefs and behaviours, their current experience, and their intentions to think and act differently in the future. It would be easy to dismiss this particular field trip as an uncomplicated experience that requires little intellectual interrogation on the part of our students -- this is, after all, precisely the kind of experience that most culinary tourists desperately seek when visiting Spain. But we would argue that the intentional, thoughtful reflection of these students, as they question how and why they understand this experience to be authentic, is precisely what makes the experience existentially authentic. As Theo van Leeuwen (2001: 396) so usefully suggests in his essay on authenticity in discourse, it is our job “to ask, not: ‘How authentic is this?’, but ‘Who takes this as authentic and who does not?’.” In our understanding of what authenticity means, no experience, no matter how accessible or how obscure, is inherently authentic. It is the practice or interrogation of the experience in which authenticity resides.

Pedagogy of the senses

It became increasingly clear to us, throughout the duration of our program, that students responded most profoundly and thoughtfully to the experiences in which their senses were really engaged. The first time they tasted a fresh anchovy. The first bite of the salty, paper-thin jamon that Spain is famous for. The mild fruitiness of the olive oil that was poured liberally on most of their meals. The cacophony of voices in a plaza bar, where patrons ranged from newborn to elderly, and no one seemed to seek out a ‘quiet table.’ The very notion of walking into a crowded bar, eating one perfect bite of food, and throwing their napkins on the floor before moving onto the next stop. We heard about these experiences from students again and again, and it became abundantly clear that this physical, sensual engagement with the food of Spain was coming to define our students’ experience.

A travel study program has very little value if it does no more than replicate the practices and purposes of a regular home classroom in the midst of another country. So while we were demanding in our expectations that students read, write, and present as part of the program, it was also crucial to us that they do, see, and feel. The critical and analytical lens of culinary tourism, after all, is not the **only way students learn through food**. In order to appreciate the pedagogical value of such food-centred study abroad programs we need to understand how the senses play a role in student learning.

Lucy Long (2004:21) highlights the importance of sensory experience in understanding culinary tourism when she encourages “an aesthetic response to food as part of that experience.” Other theorists see sensory reactions, specifically taste, as critical to food studies and to a long term memory of experiences of both food and travel. Heldke (2007: 386) suggests that:

Though it would be hyperbolic and unverifiable to assert that gustatory encounters with the unfamiliar are the most profound perceptual experiences the traveller can have, anecdotal evidence suggests the terrors and delights of the tongue affect so dramatically that their memories remain sharp even years later.

Some might argue that taste and smell are highly subjective and that what is unfamiliar for one person might not be for another. Indeed, many of our students spoke of eating things that were familiar to other people but terrifying for them, like raw meat or a barely-cooked egg. But as Carol Korsmeyer (2007: 8) suggests, senses such as taste can create and activate memories that connect the individual to the historical, the social, and the cultural:

Tastes are subjective but measurable, relative to culture and to individual, yet shared; fleeting sensations that nonetheless endure over many years in memory; transient experiences freighted with the weight of history. And finally tastes can provide entertainment

and intellectual absorption, both when they are experienced in the act of eating and drinking...

As our students spent more and more time immersing themselves in the food culture of the various regions of Spain, they became increasingly liberated in the language they used to describe experiences, challenging their comfort zones in academic writing. Instead of relying exclusively on carefully considered and deliberate references to academic articles, students started to also speak and write of the sensual pleasures of their experiences, and the simultaneous fear and delight that can come with sensory excitement. A student who had been quite conservative in her writing in the early days of the program spoke, later, of a dinner we had shared, remembering “the fresh, cold saltiness of the tuna tartare” and “the tangy sweetness of the raspberry sorbet.” Another told the story of being in a pintxos bar in San Sebastian, where a particularly elaborate array of food was displayed on the counter, only to catch a glimpse, out of the corner of her eye, of another student’s purse-sized bottle of hand sanitizer perched amidst the gorgeous display of food -- for her, this was a perfect visual juxtaposition of the culture shock that some students had experienced in Spain. In a striking echo of the Hayes-Conroys’ reference to intersection between the visceral and the cognitive, Lacey recalls the sensory experiences at the olive oil press to explain what she called a difference between “head sense” and “heart sense”:

When I reflect on that day, very little of what I recall is ‘head.’ All I remember is the oranges and the olive oil. The handshake that I got from [the owner]...the graciousness that we felt from him. That’s not really a head sense but it is a heart sense. The smell of walking in the room where they did the press. The feel of the rope circles that they squished olives in between. Still to this day a whole year later that kind of nylon-y rope, anything that looks or feels like that reminds me of that day...

She goes on to talk about how up until then, authenticity had felt like a joke, but that at this point, everyone “just got it”. For her, it was the sensory experience that made things ‘real’ and allowed her to move

from feeling like a self-conscious tourist into feeling a connection to the food culture of Spain.

Many students spoke of their sensory experience with food in Spain being a turning point in seeing the value of eating for pure pleasure instead of simply nourishment or habit. Upon her first visit to a popular and crowded tapas bar in a small town in the Rioja region, Maia, a third year Communications Studies student, writes:

...anticipation met its mark in my first visit to Asador Sagartoki. All of the passion and pleasure was immediately evident in the restaurant, redefining my notion of culture entirely. The seemingly careless ease with which the servers produced food, slinging bites from counter to plate while jet streams of cider shot from the walls behind them brought to light Bourdain's notion of "terrorizing" one bar after another...I can identify with the notion of being terrified; my experiences eating in Vitoria and in San Sebastian comprise the most uncomfortable and yet amazing eating of my life. The tapas culture requires that you work for your food, but rewards you with unending tidbits of delicious (yet unexpected) combinations. This feeling of having my comfort zone challenged was essential to shifting my perspective on consumer consciousness and the pleasures of eating. Being so involved in the process, fighting to get up to the bar, shouting to order, without knowing what you are getting, even keeping track of your own bill, puts an onus and responsibility on the diner that sharpened my perspective and made me appreciate my food, and the pleasure of eating, all the more.

Her description of the physical experience of the bar -- slinging food, shooting cider, fighting to get to the bar, shouting to order -- these sensory experiences were entirely unfamiliar to most of our Canadian students, for whom busy, crowded bars were usually for drinking and dancing, not eating, and restaurants tended to be a decidedly more sedate environment. The sensory overload created by the tapas bars of Northern Spain challenged our students' understanding of food culture in a way that made them feel -- however temporarily -- like part of Spanish life.

Conclusion

The experience of studying the food culture of another country (much like the experience of traveling abroad with a group of university students) is fraught with complexity. As instructors, we endeavour to help our students see the importance of a pedagogy of the senses – one that values and complicates their sensory experiences. We know that in doing so, we run the risk of romanticising sensory education as somehow more “natural” or “pure” than cognitive learning (Swan 2012; Hayes-Conroy 2008). This is not our goal. To be sure, we are driven by a desire to see our students stop dismissing their senses as something separate from cognition – to think about how taste and sound and smell, for instance, can inspire and motivate both a bodily and an intellectual understanding of food and their relationship with it. We would never suggest that sensory learning is any less racialised, or classed, or gendered than cognitive learning; indeed, we talk about precisely these issues regarding the social construction of sensory experience on a daily basis throughout the program. While many of our students, in their early reflective writing, are producing “middle-class epiphanies”² framed by Western narratives of food, travel, and authenticity, they are also providing entry into a more complex interrogation of what – and how – they know.

Throughout their travels and studies, our students struggle, much as we do in this article, to make sense of authenticity. There is a great temptation -- among tourists, among students, and Thanks to Elaine Swan for this phrase. indeed, among academics, to settle on a tidy definition of authenticity that can provide satisfaction to the traveller in search of authentic experiences. But such a tidy definition is virtually impossible, and, in our minds, ultimately dissatisfying, erasing the nuances that make authenticity interesting. As Wang (1999: 353) so usefully suggests, it is crucial to recognise that “authenticity is not a matter of black or white, but rather involves a much wider spectrum, rich in ambiguous colors. That which is judged as inauthentic or staged authenticity by experts, intellectuals, or elite may be experienced as authentic and real from an emic perspective--

2 Thanks to Elaine Swan for this phrase.

this may be the very way that mass tourists experience authenticity.” This notion of a spectrum of authenticity is exceptionally valuable for us as teachers -- it provides us with an entryway to problematise the more “obviously” or stereotypically authentic experience of the olive oil press, as well as to invite reflection on how eating a Big Mac in the midst of the walled city of Toledo might be an equally authentic experience.

We would argue that food is a powerful, but not uncomplicated, pedagogical tool in the process of student learning, where both the mind and the body are simultaneously engaged in understanding crucial components of communication and culture. As culinary tourists, students are critically engaged with the food culture of Spain, but as sensory beings they are also individually challenged as they experience food and eating with a deliberate awareness of both sensory and cognitive experiences. Our students became aware of their own power to create meaning in experiences, recognising that critical analysis and intentional reflection can be applied to even the most quotidian moments of their travels -- the sensory experiences that they have often taken for granted. Finally, with time and seemingly endless discussion, they come to understand authenticity as a process of engagement between subject and object -- as a means, rather than an end.

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